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An Analysis of *Les Yeux Clos II* by Toru Takemitsu

Jason Mile

I: Introduction

Les Yeux Clos II (1989) is a solo piano piece composed by Toru Takemitsu, dedicated to and premiered by Peter Serkin.¹ It is the second of three pieces based on lithographs by Odilon Redon.² The piece falls within what Peter Burt calls Takemitsu's "Third Period," which began after the composition of the famous piece, *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* (1977).³ It was during this time that Takemitsu began to move away from the modernist aesthetic and to consolidate his Western and Japanese influences into a personal style that Timothy Koozin describes as the combination of the "syntax of contemporary Western music and an aesthetic sense rooted in Japanese tradition."⁴ By identifying significant influences from both of these traditions and using them as a basis for formal and harmonic analysis, this paper will examine the extent to which both Western and Eastern traditions are present in Takemitsu's *Les Yeux Clos II*.

II. Historical Background and Influences

Having been raised in the militaristic World War II era Japan, Takemitsu initially rejected his Japanese heritage and eschewed traditional Japanese music, which he claimed "recalled the bitter memories of war."⁵ It was during these early years of rejecting Eastern tradition that

¹ Per F. Broman, liner notes to *Rain Tree: The Complete Solo Piano Music of Toru Takemitsu*, Noriko Ogawa, BIS, BIS-CD-805, CD, 1996, 7.

² Noriko Ohtake, *Creative Sources for the Music of Toru Takemitsu*. (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1993), 85. The first two pieces, *Les Yeux Clos* (1979) and *Les Yeux Clos II*, are solo piano pieces and correspond to the two monochrome lithographs – the unified timbre of the piano representing the colour scheme of the piece. The third lithograph, in colour, corresponds to an orchestral reworking of *Les Yeux Clos*, which appears as the second movement of *Visions* (1989). The pieces were not composed as a unified set, but rather the set of lithographs served as a source of inspiration for three distinct pieces. See Peter Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226-227.

³ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 175.

⁴ Timothy Koozin, "Octatonicism in Recent Piano Works of Toru Takemitsu," *Perspectives of New Music* 29, no. 1 (1991): 125, accessed March 26, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/833071>.

⁵ Toru Takemitsu, 'Contemporary Music in Japan', ed. John Rahn, *Perspectives of New Music* XXVII/2 (Summer 1989), 199, as quoted in Ohtake, *Creative Sources for the Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 1.

Takemitsu discovered Western music, specifically of French composers Messiaen and Debussy, who would become lifelong influences on him. Takemitsu adopted the “pan-focus” style he identified in Debussy, in which music did not have a central focus, but rather “many focal points of sound.”⁶ The influence of Messiaen is far more palpable; from him Takemitsu adopted the notion of mode, particularly the octatonic scale, Messiaen’s second mode of limited transposition.⁷ Takemitsu would develop his own approach to the use of the octatonic scale in which the mode was used as a base and external chromatic pitches were added, a technique employed in *Les Yeux Clos II*.⁸

Takemitsu’s “aesthetic sense” developed in part through a reluctant acceptance of his cultural heritage, as well as interaction with the New York experimental school, specifically the American composer John Cage, who was himself strongly influenced by East-Asian ideas.⁹ Burt identifies numerous musical ideas shared between Cage and Takemitsu, such as “the concept of a pluralistic, many layered, spatialized music [...] and the preference for the individual timbre of the single sound event over and above the syntactical relationships between such events which have traditionally formed the discourse of Western music.”¹⁰ Takemitsu’s careful control of sound and timbre can be seen in his later music, most evidently in his orchestral works, but also in his solo piano pieces through the use of various precisely notated pedal markings. His conception of form also demonstrates some influence of Cage, as he famously states that “what I want to do is not to put sounds in motion towards a goal by controlling them. For me, it would be enough to gather sounds around me and then gently put them into motion. To move the sounds

⁶ Ohtake, *Creative Sources*, 7.

⁷ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 247.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28

⁹ Ohtake, *Creative Sources*, 8.

¹⁰ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 12.

around the way you drive a car is the worst thing you can do with them."¹¹ This notion of non-teleological musical construction will prove invaluable in understanding the form of the piece.

III: Analysis

Now equipped with an understanding of Takemitsu's aesthetic ideas and harmonic influences, the analysis of the work may commence. The piece comprises of forty-three measures of greatly varying length, many of which are further subdivided by dotted bar lines. There is no precise tempo marking, simply an indication that a dotted eighth note is "Very Slow." A preliminary survey of the music reveals little repetition of material, with the only large-scale literal repetition occurring at the end of the piece. Bearing in mind Takemitsu's mature conception of form, the irregular divisions of the musical material, vague tempo indication and through-composed nature of the piece, it may be useful to consider this piece as a continuous stream of sound, rather than attempting to define it through traditional formal models. A close study of the pedal markings reveal two extended moments of complete silence in the piece, both a dotted eighth note's length: the first at m. 22, the second at the beginning of m. 36.¹² Using these silences as formal landmarks, the piece can be divided into three continuous streams: mm. 1-21, mm. 23-35, and mm. 36-43.¹³ Based on a recording of the piece by Noriko Ogawa, these sections last 3'17", 3'00", and 2'00", respectively, meaning that this would divide the work into three sections of comparable length.¹⁴ As these sections are delineated through moments of

¹¹ As quoted in Broman, liner notes to *Rain Tree*, 4.

¹² Based on the tempo marking, even a break of this length would be an audibly significant pause.

¹³ The silences, for the sake of this paper, will be considered formal dividers, rather than concluding parts of the previous section. As such, m. 22 is not accounted for as it is completely silent, and thus formally exists between sections, rather than as part of them.

¹⁴ Toru Takemitsu, *Rain Tree: The Complete Solo Piano Music of Toru Takemitsu*, with Noriko Ogawa. BIS, BIS-CD-805, CD, 1996.

silence, rather than thematic or motivic relationships, they shall simply be referred to as sections 1, 2, and 3.¹⁵

These sections can be further divided based on rhythmic activity and small scale repetition. Burt notes how "a Takemitsu trademark is the literal repetition of whole passages - and especially [...] the repetition of the opening material as a sign of imminent closure."¹⁶ As such, small-scale repetition of motivic fragments may also serve to indicate the ends of smaller formal units. Long, isolated sustained notes in the middle of sections are uncommon in Takemitsu's style, and so extended pauses in activity, along with fermatas, may also help to partition the larger sections into smaller ones. Using long pauses and motivic repetition as indicators of closure, section 1 can be divided into subsections *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, and *e*, section 2 can be divided into subsections *f*, *g*, a transition, and *a'*, and section 3 can be divided into subsections *g'* and *a''*, as shown in Figure 1 below.¹⁷ This form chart indicates the initial appearance of three distinct motives along with their repetitions, as well as the type of pause that ends each subsection. The three motives in question are labelled *x*, *y*, and *z*, as seen in Examples 1 to 3 below. It is clear that each of the subsections ends with a return (or variation) of one of the three motives, followed by either a fermata or a substantial rest.¹⁸

¹⁵ Although section 3 features the return of material from section 1, it also features substantial material from section 2, and thus the label of ABA' for the form would be inappropriate. In addition, the numerous subsections within section 1 are no more related to each other than they are to section 2; because of their lack of motivic dependence, each of the subsections outlined above could be seen as a particular moment, independent from, but closely related to, all of the other moments. As such, unifying them all under an 'A' label would be misleading.

¹⁶ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 28.

¹⁷ Given the through-composed, but motivically unified nature of Takemitsu's music, repetition of labels (such as *a'*) will be reserved for exact, or near-exact, repetition of material.

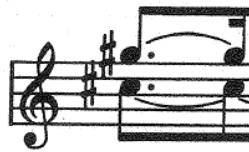
¹⁸ Recall that a dotted eighth rest, according to tempo indication, is "Very Slow."

	Section 1									
subsection	a (1-5)			b (6-9)			c (10-13)		d (14-16)	
measures	1 and 4	5	5	8	9	9	12	13	16	16/17
motives/features	x and y (initial)	x (return)	↪	z (initial)	y (return)	↪	z (return)	↪	y (varied)	↪

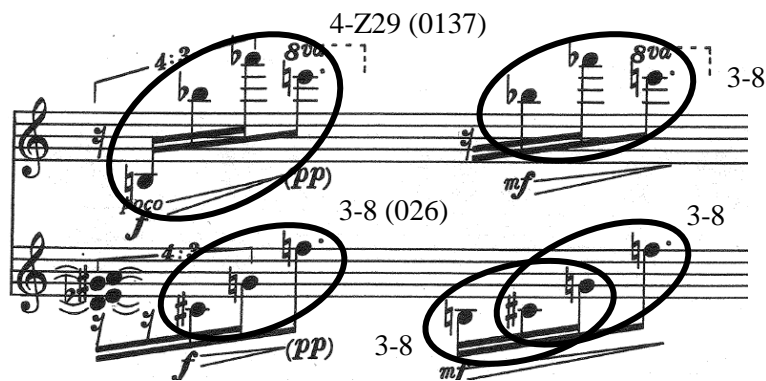
	Silence	Section 2					
e (17-21)		f (23-28)	g (29-30)	transition (31-34)		a' (34-35)	
21	22	27-28	28	30	-	34	
y (varied)	-	z (return)	↪	y (varied)	lack of motivic return	↪	a' (partial return), contains x

	Silence	Section 3				
		g' (36-40)		a'' (41-43)		
	36	36	37-39	40	41	42
	-	x (return)	g (full return)	↪ ↪	x (return)	a' (partial return)

Figure 1: Formal outline of *Les Yeux Clos II* based on motivic return



Example 1: Motive x, as seen in m. 1



Example 2: Motive y, as seen in m. 4

Example 3: Motive z, as seen in m. 8

Motive *x* is characterized by a sustained fifth (either perfect or augmented) with pitch class G-sharp in the upper register, as seen in Example 1.¹⁹ Motive *y*, seen in Example 2, is expressed as rising 3-8 (026) cells combined with a 4-Z29 (0137) tetrachord (of which *sc* 3-8 is a subset) to form *sc* 7-31 (0134679), a subset of the octatonic collection, the relevance of which will be discussed shortly. Motive *z* is a rising arpeggiated expression of *sc* 6-30 (013679), another octatonic subset, expressed as a pair of gestures, as seen in example 3. It is worth reiterating that it is not these motives in themselves that are used to indicate closure, but repetition of them in conjunction with pauses in rhythmic activity. As seen above, it is a combination of Eastern ideas of sound and Western syntactical devices that serve to delineate the formal structure of the piece.

Now understanding the form, the following analysis will focus on Takemitsu's use of referential collections and sonorities. As mentioned previously, Takemitsu often used the octatonic scale as the foundation for a chromatic surface.²⁰ In addition, Broman mentions the prominent use of the "Tristan chord," *sc* 4-27 (0258), as a referential sonority in the work.²¹ This

¹⁹ Despite the significance of the alteration of the interval in terms of set classes, the motif remains recognizable because of its near-identical rhythmic presentation in each instance and the inclusion of pitch class G-sharp.

²⁰ This analysis will expand on the work done by Timothy Koozin, in Koozin, "Octatonicism in Recent Piano Works of Toru Takemitsu."

²¹ Broman, liner notes to *Rain Tree*, 7. Broman does not assert that this necessarily functions in the same way as a Tristan chord, but merely uses the name as a means of labelling a recognizable sonority. While the chord does appear with the same voicing and pitch level as it does in Wagner's Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, it lacks the peculiar resolution that distinguishes the Tristan chord from a traditional half-diminished seventh chord. Instead, Takemitsu uses the chord strictly as a vertical structure, often having it move in parallel motion in all voices. Without the definitive voice-leading, the label of "Tristan chord" is meaningless, and as such the label will not be used throughout the rest of the paper.

analysis will discuss the use of both the octatonic scale and sc 4-27 during sections *a* and *b* of *Les Yeux Clos II*.²²

Section *a* begins with the *x* motive played over two expressions of the sc 4-9 (0167) tetrachord related by a T_3 transformation (based on the lowest note of each gesture), as shown in Example 4.²³ These tetrachords, when combined, form the $OCT_{0,1}$ collection. The C-sharp from the *x* motive fits into this collection, but the G-sharp does not, suggesting that it is a chromatic addition.

Example 4: m. 1 of *Les Yeux Clos II*.

Measure 3, shown in Example 5, also features the $OCT_{0,1}$ collection, but with different chromatic deviations. Combining all of the pitches in m. 3 produces the octatonic collection with an added G-sharp, as in the previous measure; however, it also has an added D and is missing an E-flat.

Burt suggests that the use of added chromatic pitches may stem from Takemitsu's Japanese heritage, stating that this technique is potentially used as a "means to simulate the microtonal

²² A thorough discussion of the harmonic content of the whole piece is beyond the scope of this paper.

²³ The T_3 transformation recurs throughout subsections *a* and *b*. These instances will be noted due to their potential analytical interest; however, the present discussion seeks only to identify the different referential collections present in the music, and does not seek to assert any significance to these transformations beyond the fact that they are present due to the scope of the paper.

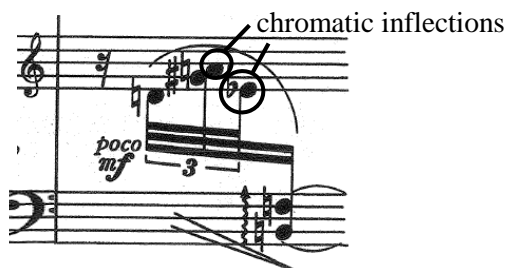
inflections of traditional Japanese instruments.”²⁴ As such, one could imagine the added D not as a chromatic addition, but a chromatic inflection of one of the notes of the mode, explaining its presence and the absence of the E-flat.

Example 5: m. 3 of *Les Yeux Clos II*

Following this, m. 4 begins with the same figuration of the sc 4-9 (0167) tetrachord from m. 1, this time projecting the OCT_{2,3} collection, (assuming that this tetrachord plays the same role in the collection as the tetrachords from m. 1) as shown in Example 6. This proves not to be the case, as the rest of the measure constitutes the y motive, which forms the OCT_{1,2} collection, though missing a D. Treating the whole measure as one collection, the missing D corresponds to the D that begins the sc 4-9 (0167) tetrachord in the beginning of the measure. The E-flat and A-natural that do not belong to the OCT_{1,2} collection could then be treated as chromatic inflections that are “corrected” later in the measure. Measure 5 then features a return of motive x over sc 6-30, presented as a hexachordal subset of the OCT_{0,1} collection. Without other notes in the measure, the absence of two notes can only be explained as an omission. Perhaps Takemitsu,

²⁴ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 28.

having already presented the full octatonic in m. 1, believed that a six-note subset was now sufficient to evoke octatonicism.



Example 6: beginning of m. 4

The *b* section begins with the juxtaposition of two full octatonic collections, each with an added chromatic note, as shown in Example 7. Following the first dotted bar line in m. 6, there are two chords that are members of sc 5-26 (02458), related by a T_3 transformation (similar to the 4-9 (0167) tetrachords from m. 1). Set class 5-26 is not a subset that can suggest octatonic space, but it is a superset of the other referential sonority identified in this piece: sc 4-27, which is an octatonic subset. Assuming that Takemitsu treats referential sonorities in the same way that he treats referential collections, these two chords can be explained as two instances of sc 4-27 with added chromatic tones. These also function as transition chords, as the first chord is a literal subset of the altered octatonic set that precedes it, and the second chord has three common tones with the unaltered form of the $OCT_{1,2}$ collection, which is projected immediately following it.

Example 7: first 2 sections of m. 6

The remainder of section *b* continues this alternation of octatonic collections and chromatically altered sc 4-27. The section of m. 6 after the second dotted bar line repeats the first two chords which is followed by a sc 4-Z29 tetrachord that, when combined with the gesture in the high register, forms the OCT_{1,2} collection, with the G chromatically inflected to F-sharp. Two unaltered 4-27 chords begin the next measure, followed by two more 5-26 pentachords related by T₃; the second 5-26 combines with the following 4-17 in the extreme registers of the piano to form an OCT_{0,1} collection with two chromatically inflected pitches (F instead of F-sharp and B instead of A-sharp). Measure 8 begins with an unaltered 4-27, succeeded by three chromatic variants, followed by an arpeggiated rising gesture that projects the OCT_{0,1} collection. Set class 6-30 returns to complete the octatonic collection, this time appearing as motive *z*. The next measure features a member of sc 5-28 (02368), which is both a 4-27 chord with a chromatic addition and a subset of the octatonic collection. This combines with the return of the *y* motive to form the OCT_{2,3} collection with an omitted E-flat and added notes G and B-flat.

IV. Conclusion

As seen in the analysis above, *Les Yeux Clos II* exhibits a through-composed form, divided into three discrete sections. These sections can be further divided, with the subsections delineated through the use of motivic repetition and extended pauses. Within the sections, harmonic structures are conceived with the octatonic collection as a base, which are altered through the use of omission, chromatic addition, and chromatic inflection. Moving further into the piece, octatonic projections are separated through the use of chromatically altered octatonic subsets, most notably sc 4-27.

Harmonically, this piece closely resembles the work of Messiaen partly because of the extensive use of the octatonic scale and its subset, sc 4-27. This use of a familiar mode and tertian harmonic construction places it typical of the “contemporary Western syntax” Koozin referred to earlier, allowing *Les Yeux Clos II* to be understood through a Western lens. However, some of the chromatic alteration can be interpreted as chromatic inflections; these serve as evidence of Japanese influence. As such, the harmonic content of the piece is evidence of a combination of Western and Japanese techniques.

The form of the work also expresses this synthesis of Western and Eastern influence through its use of ideas from John Cage in its focus on particular sonorities (in this case, octatonic collections) as well as a continuous, non-goal directed notion of form, ideas which themselves originated in the East. Broman states that “the process of listening to [Takemitsu’s] music could then be likened to a walk through a musical garden without beginning or end.”²⁵ Takemitsu specifically compared the structure of his pieces preceding to *Les Yeux Clos II* to the experience of walking through a Japanese rock garden, further espousing the Japanese “aesthetic

²⁵ Broman, liner notes to *Rain Tree*, 4.

sense” in his music.²⁶ Based on the persistence of particular motifs, as well as the omnipresent octatonic sonority, the different subsections could be compared to seeing the same thing from different angles; to extend the earlier comparison, hearing this piece is akin to walking around a garden and observing a single object from different positions. This interpretation places the piece outside of the traditional Western conception of form, making it is easier to understand from an Eastern perspective. Through its harmonic language and formal structure, *Les Yeux Clos II* illustrates Takemitsu’s unique synthesis of Western and Eastern influences that defines his mature style.

²⁶ Burt, *The Music of Toru Takemitsu*, 168. The piece Takemitsu specifically mentions is *Garden Rain* (1974).

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